

An Effective Learner Support Services and Systems at the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL)

Formal Education: Open Schooling

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This article examines alternative ways of developing a framework for Secondary Education learners and Professional students support services systems for NAMCOL. Whereas distance education learners in Namibia are scattered in various parts of the country, there are shortcomings in adequate and systematic support for them. The question of the study is: What support systems would be appropriate for these distance education learners? A qualitative survey will be conducted using questionnaire, interviews, focus group discussions, participatory experience observation checklists and documentary checklists to find out how support systems as part of a larger distance education whole system, should be integrated within the learning experience of distance education at NAMCOL. Although currently we have tutoring centres activities and interactive learning, it has been observed that the activities already in existence if organized systematically, would improve the organization and implementation of support for the distance learner.

A system is recommended that shows the systematic ways in which support for students would be organized, planned and implemented to suit students and tutors requirements and one that would fit within the existing socio-economic environment in Namibia. A distance education programme must design and apply effective learner support services and systems.

The aim of this study is to review and determine the applications and important problems of the learner support services and systems and present a number of suggestions to enhance learner support in the Namibian distance education system.

Introduction

NAMCOL is a dedicated, single-mode open and distance learning (ODL) institution. It was established in 1997 to provide a programme of secondary education for those who cannot or do not wish to attend conventional schools to study for the Junior Secondary Certificate (grade 10) or the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate (grade 12). Since 1998, the college introduced a range of professional and vocational programmes to further fulfil its mandate of addressing the diverse training needs of the Namibian people. Moreover, the college follows an incremental approach in the implementation of post-secondary programmes in community development, youth works and local government, with the programme in community development having been on offer since 1998.

Distance Education has created enormous opportunities for the expansion of educational opportunities. The distance learning institutions all over the world have been challenged to transform their policies and procedures to accommodate the ever growing number of learners. To cater for this rapid demand, distance education programs must design and apply effective learner support services and systems. In many distance education systems, more resources are invested in the technical systems at the expense of the learner support systems. Equivalent or more resources should be invested in the learner support system if the distance education enterprise is to be successful (Gunawardena, 1996, 271). From the literature (Lamb and Smith, 2000 and Tait, 2000 cited in Mowes, 2007) on students support in open and distance learning it was concluded that:

“Factors which correlate positively with course completion rates include the use of course assignments, early submission of first assignment, time for giving students feedback, pacing progress, supplementary audio-tapes and telephone tutorials, favourable working conditions in the student’s context, quality of learning materials and reminders from tutors to complete work”.

While learner support systems contribute to the process of offering an effective distance education programme and continuously contribute to the quality of a distance learning course, the assumption is that this is not the case in Namibia. In this study, we focussed on the quality of the support system that NAMCOL provides to learners and attempts to identify aspects of the learners’ support system that contribute largely to the learners’ learning process. The study subsequently tries to clarify critical dimensions in the support system that contribute significantly to the overall quality of the support systems. The results of this study are vital for the institution to identify the areas of the support system that should be given greater emphasis and improvement to ensure a high level of satisfaction among learners regarding the quality and effectiveness of the support system provided to them. The study explored the effectiveness of the support available to learners registered with NAMCOL.

Effectiveness of Learner Support Systems

The learners’ support system in Distance Education may be defined as all activities beyond the production and the delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of learners in their studies (Simpson, 2000). The provision of learner support services including personal and financial counseling, careers guidance and support for learners is an established part of the support available to learners in all institutions, including NAMCOL.

Besides the more traditional technology such as print, broadcast television and radio talks, NAMCOL add new technologies as they strive to enhance the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning. These include use of audiotapes, videotapes, web-based materials.

The second category of the learners’ support is non-academic – the support of learners in the effective and organizational aspects of their studies (Simpson, 2000). The third category is Continuous Assessment and Feedback. This forms part of the studies and is important because it enables learners to assess their academic progress throughout the year. Besides having specific challenging, attainable learning goals and focusing on the task, the first factor that make goal-setting in the classroom effective is feedback. When feedback tells a learner that current effort have fallen short of the goals, the learner can exert more effort or even try another strategy. ‘When feedback tells the learner that the goal is reached or exceed, the learner should feel satisfied and competent enough perhaps to set a higher goal for the future. There is evidence that feedback emphasizing progress is most effective (Woolfolk, 1998, 380-381).

The learners’ support is an important service that needs to be provided by the institution to the learners because of the characteristics of distance learners themselves. They are isolated and come from diverse backgrounds – economic, social, educational and occupational. The provision of such an educational support system ensures the facilitation of communication between learners, the academic staff as well as the administrator to cater for administrative needs of the learners (Kember & Dekker, 1987; Sewart, 1992).

The provision of learners’ support is now widely and increasingly recognized as an essentials component of any open and distance learning system. As learners are the most important stakeholders in any educational system, distance education providers should provide the highest possible effective learner support services possible to all of them as without their presence, a distance education programme will not succeed (Ravisankar & Murthy, 2000).

As the responsibility of learning is in the hands of the learners, it is important that learners’ support from NAMCOL should also be learner-focused and meets the learners’ expectations and needs. Learners themselves are in the best position to know what kinds of support systems are significant in order to

achieve their educational and personal goals. Moreover, distance education learners are adults and they are able to determine quality according to their individual needs (McIlroy & Walker, 1993).

Learner support services in NAMCOL

NAMCOL uses a blended learning approach as part of its provision of learner support.

Support to learners must be ongoing, starting during enrolment and continuing for the duration of the course. Non-academic support services offered to learners include orientation workshops at the beginning of each academic year and provision of the NAMCOL Good Study Guide, which gives learners study skills and important hints on how to prepare for examinations. Support through the use of short message sending (SMS) has also been found to be effective, with SMS being widely used as a tool to communicate reminders and urgent information to learners and tutors.

Academic support includes face-to-face tutorial support as well as other innovations through multimedia technology. Multimedia content is used primarily to supplement print-based materials provided to learners in some subjects. Feedback on tutor-marked assignments is another critical support system, serving as a platform of dialogue between learner and tutor.

To foster collaboration and networking in ODL, the Namibian Open Learning Network Trust (NOLNet) was established in 2001 between the publicly funded ODL institutions and the Ministry of Education. NOLNet's purpose is to share ODL expertise and resources and avoid duplication of efforts. Therefore, in addition to the direct support from the college. Learners have access to 49 NOLNet centres (existing libraries, resource and outreach centres of government ministries, and partner institutions) spread across the country where learners can access resources materials, IT equipment, Internet and e-mail facilities.

Research Design and Methodology

The research needed to answer questions like how effective the support systems are in Namibian distance education, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the learners support systems used at NAMCOL centers, whether student really make use of the support systems available to them and what strategies can be put in place to improve the quality of already existing learners support systems. In order to arrive at these answers data was collected using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies using open structured interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions, document analysis and observations.

The individual interviews focused on understanding the learner and their distance learning experiences and investigated what the learners valued in distance learning and how the experience made better quality for themselves. Some interviews were done informally using a telephonic semi-structured approach. Telephone interviews enable a researcher to gather information rapidly and like personal interviews, they allow for some personal contact between the interviewer and the respondent. It also helped to overcome the distance to the learners and allowed the researcher to access at convenient times based on students other commitments to school, family and work.

To obtain a profile of the learners at NAMCOL, the researcher made use of document analysis. Le Compte and Preissle (1993: 216) defines documents "as artificial symbolic materials such as writing and signs." They further say documents can tell the researchers about the inner meaning of everyday events and they may yield descriptions of extraordinary events human life. The researcher reviewed and interrogated various NAMCOL documents which gave a holistic description of the learners.

The sample consisted of 57 learners, 25 tutors and 10 parents who were involved in the programme and these participants were selected through criterion sampling in which the researcher picked all cases that

meet some criterion, such as all students that study at NAMCOL, tutors at the center and parents with children at the centers. At to select the centers the researcher made use of convenience sampling which saves time, money, and effort.

Summary of findings

The data collected in the study covered a number of areas beyond the learner support services. The most critical points were the conducting of orientation workshops, lack of communication and attitudes of tutors. Table 1 below illustrated that most learners do not make use of the learner support services offered by NAMCOL.

The literature and findings from my investigation indicate discrepancies between the officially declared provision of learner support services and the accessibility and use of these services in practice.

The researcher determined the degree of the contribution of the three highest positively linked dimensions towards the overall satisfaction of learner support, which is the printed learning materials (study materials), tutorial centres and vacation workshop. The results revealed that the contribution of the printed learning materials towards the overall learner support services were significant.

The finding revealed that the printed learning materials are the most important determiner in the quality of the learners' support system. In order to increase the satisfaction of learners towards the learners' support system, it is therefore vital for NAMCOL to increase the satisfaction of learners in printed learning materials. The modular printed learning materials are the concrete frontier of quality assurance. This finding is also consistent with the study of Ibrahim & Silong (1997) which pointed out that the academic module is an important aspect in the learners' support system. The students' responses from questionnaires also indicate that drop-in study skills provision is useful and is being utilized.

Tuition is taking place but only, 10% of the tutors in my survey had delivered some sort of distance education courses. The picture that emerges from the survey showed us that the majority of our tutors are still largely dependent on traditional models of teaching. Tutors were aware of their lack of knowledge in open and distance learning methods and tools and expressed their need for training.

One important, but often overlooked feature of a support system is simply the lack of the learner to receive and tutor to give feedback.

Another finding is that most learners struggle with English as a medium of instruction, because those in remote areas mainly use vernaculars as medium of communication even in teaching and learning environment. As such they do not utilize the opportunities created for them by NAMCOL.

Most students brought up the lack of support from the family, but also indicated that it was inevitable as their parents are also not educated or too busy providing for the family.

The study provided that though learners receive the Copy of the NAMCOL Good Study Guides, it was never explained to learners, and they never use it.

With regards to the trend of all the responses, the results revealed that the respondents were not satisfied with the effectiveness and value of orientation workshops. Respondents, however, expressed their frustration about lack of awareness of student support services and systems.

This findings supports the suggestion by Bird and Morgan (2003) that the ability of today's distance education student to become part of learning community depends on the provision of detailed explanations of the types of academic and administrative student support provided by the particular institution, so that learners can feel confident that support is not only close at hand, but that it is also something to which they are entitled.

Table 1: Access to and attendance to learner support services

Learner Support Services	Attendance/Accessibility				
	Never	Seldom	Often	Very often	TOTAL
Five-hour orientation workshop;	20	7	10	20	57
Copy of the NAMCOL Good Study Guide;	57	0	0	0	57
A full set of NAMCOL Study Guides and/or textbooks for each subject	0	0	0	57	57
Five hour of face-to-face tuition per week in each subject for JSC; and Three hours of face-to-face tuition per week in each subject for NSSCO;	5	15	17	20	57
Two vacation workshops every year;	10	10	17	20	57
Three assignments; and	0	0	0	57	57
Self-supervised study halls;	30	7	10	10	57
Prospectus for learners	0	0	0	57	57
HIV and AIDS Programmes and Sessions at tuition centers	10	20	12	15	57
Resources centers and libraries;	25	7	10	15	57
Tutors reports;	0	0	0	57	57
Feedback tutorials letters;	0	0	0	57	57
Toll free Helpline;	20	10	20	7	57
Short Message Sending (SMS);	0	0	0	57	57
Lessons through ICTs;	30	10	10	7	57
Educational Radio Project.	0	12	10	35	57

Recommendations

The results of this descriptive study are potentially useful for distance educators, serving learners on distance education and education research.

Learners need to be involved actively in their learning by doing what is required to not only learn the content but to work on understanding how the information fits into their life, and know the institution with which they are involved.

Information must be available to learners regarding all the resources that are available to help them learn. Orientation workshops should aim to help learners identify areas of weakness which might force on their learning and also be designed to enable learners to connect to their chosen program and promote affiliation to a particular institution. The trend of customer care and customer satisfaction from the service sector has been influential in developing support services provided for distance learners. Laying the foundations for learners to take “greater responsibility for their own learning” is an important enabler of effective orientation workshops design (Barton, 2001, p.49).

Learners have again mentioned that it is critical for them to be tutored as tutoring in ODL helps bring an interpersonal element to the learning process. In most instances the learner interacts with her or his study materials alone and they perceive tutorials sessions as time when they should be provided with guidance on how to effectively interact with their instruction study materials. The role of the tutor in distance learning is substantially different from a traditional teaching role, in that it is more of a “pastoral” and guidance role, rather than a direct teaching role.

They again suggested that the tutor should be able to effectively communicate with the feedback he or she provides, as well as to acknowledge the learners diverse views. An ODL tutor should be able to empathize with the learners’ personal issues that may affect learning. He or she should counsel and be a friend to the learners providing them with the necessary information and giving the moral support. As a counselor, the tutor should be flexible, trustworthy, approachable and well organized. As a counselor, the tutor should also help learners with social challenges. The learner further pointed out that in addition to tutorials offering counseling opportunities, it helps them in that it creates opportunities for contact and dialogue, which goes a long way in overcoming the isolation and loneliness of distance learning.

Feedback must be given to the learner as soon as possible and include specifics for improvement. The feedback should cover both course content and the learning process. The better distance education institutions provided interpersonal communication and feedback, as well as course content, by a range of facilities known as student support services.

However, the finding of this study indicate that the role of the open learning tutor is perhaps as multifaceted as open learning itself. Tutors’ skills in offering learner support are not only vital, but also unique. This is largely because open learning tutors are usually supportive, and adult learners have a wide range of needs that are different to the average school leaver entering higher education (Knowles 1990, Roger, 1993). Tutors are indispensable factors in the achievement of education goals and objectives (Cwikla 2004). Distance learning tutors should develop and acquire innovation skills and strategies of teaching in distance mode to obtain meaningful learning. For this purpose, active monitoring in the teaching process at tutorial centres are highly recommended.

The institution must provide support for learners in a variety of areas such as study skills, personal counseling and in the case of distance education, on site support in the form of a coordinator who is available to help learners with content, as well as, delivery issues. Student support, especially student guidance and counseling, tutor support, and effective information and administrative systems all provide a range of activity that impacts not only in terms of teaching but also effectively, that is to say reinforcing the learner sense of confidence, self-esteem and progress.

Learner support should also come from families and communities. Distance learners feel isolated from the communities and families because their time outside work is spend in school work. Very often they miss on social activities like funerals, weddings and feasts, they felt like outsiders.

Conclusion

One important means of analyzing the effectiveness of the teaching-learning experience in a distance education system is through the analysis of the learner’s support system.

In spite of the fact that the student is an adult learner, the student is still a novice in the learning situation, the student is also more dependent, with a need for structure, direction, external reinforcement and

support, provided by the educator. On the other hand the educator as authority and expert has a more prominent role in teaching, encouraging, designing and evaluating of teaching materials

Though few continuous interaction and learners' active participation in the learning process challenges were faced and some still need to be addressed, the above account of growth, development and effectiveness in open and distance learning have resulted in a move towards learner-centered learning, promoting the intellectual development of the distance education learner through continuous interaction and learners' active participation in the learning process.

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